

Dec. 6, 2009
Luke 1: 39-45
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Fear Not

In preparation for today's confirmation class the parents and youth had an assignment to look at the Christmas stories in the four gospels. They are each quite different. The Christmas stories capture our imaginations. Many years ago when our oldest daughter Lauren received her Bible from the church, she decided she wanted to read the Christmas story first. Soon she came to me and said she couldn't find the story about Jesus' birth. I suggested that she look at the beginning of the New Testament. She said, "I did that, but it just lists all these men who are the fathers of so and so." So I helped her find the verses in Matthew and Luke that she was looking for. She thought it odd that there were two different stories but went off to read them. Soon she was back with big saucer eyes and an incredulous tone, "Did you know that Mary and Joseph weren't married when she got pregnant?" "Yes," I said. "Well, they don't tell you that at Sunday School," she replied.

It is ironic that at the heart of our beautiful Christmas story is a shocking situation – a teenage, not fully wed, mother. So...What are we to think? Is this really what happened? Why is this story told? Suffice it to say that some people are comfortable taking the story at face value, while others in good faith seek to explore other historical possibilities.

With the absence of a Christmas story in the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel written, and no mention of it by Paul in his epistles, it appears that interest in Jesus' birth was not prominent in the early church. However, as the church sought to explain to the world its conviction that Jesus was both fully human, born of a woman, and fully divine, Child of God, Christmas stories began to be told.

Today we hear the beginnings of the story from the gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary. This story of Mary's experience encountering the holy in the angel Gabriel is the kind of spiritual experience that people come out of and wonder, "Was it just a dream?" Yet, with this kind of dream, maybe we are wise to remember the words of the poet Langston Hughes, who wrote,

*Hold fast to Dreams
for if dreams die
life is a broken winged bird
that cannot fly.*

In accepting her calling, to embody God's presence in the world, Mary's life takes flight. And not only Mary's life, but also the whole creation takes wing in a new way.

Often at this time of year it is a challenge to listen with new ears to the same old story of Christmas. It runs the danger of seeming routine to us instead of witnessing to a life that changed the world. We know the story and its characters. They are as familiar as the crèche figures we pull out of the closet and set up again on the mantle piece - the animals, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds and angels. Those angels are well... sooo... angelic. We've domesticated them, in contrast to the biblical depictions of such messengers of God.

When biblical angels appear they usually start with a greeting of some kind. The Christmas pageant kind of hello "Lo", or we might imagine the more contemporary "Yo", or in the case of today's story Gabriel opens with the word, "Greetings." But very quickly angels add these words, "Fear not." They better say "Fear Not," or the person being encountered is likely to run away screaming. A visitation from an angel is not typically a comforting, Christmassy kind of experience. There is usually something BIG about to happen. It is a fasten your seat belt kind of "Fear Not." The person's world is about to be turned upside down. Sometimes the whole world is about to shift. Such is the situation with Mary. And she gets it. Her song, the Magnificat, is no lullaby. She proclaims God's ways of justice and peace in the midst of the world's turmoil.

We're usually not ready for such big changes. In fact some of us aren't even ready for Christmas to come again. . I don't mean the I-haven't-finished- my-shopping-yet kind of not ready. I mean I'm-too-pained-and/or-too-worried-about-the-world-to-be-hearing-good-news-of great-joy kind of not ready. However, God doesn't wait until we are ready. Christmas comes because God is always coming.

Madeleine L'Engle expressed it this way:

*God did not wait till the world was ready, till...nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried out for release.*

...

*God came to a world which did not mesh,
To heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

...

*We cannot wait till the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice, for to share our grief,
to touch our pain, God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!
(Imaging the Word, V. 1, pg. 85)*

God came and continues to come into a world, which does not mesh, into imperfect times, with the perennial issues of poverty and warfare, and yet also into changing times. We know we are living in a time of BIG changes – political changes, social changes, technological changes, and climate changes. Times of such significant change generate a lot of fear. We need the "Fear Not" reassurance of angels, for we live in an age of anxiety. Some of us might think anxiety is just our own issue, but it is much bigger than any one of us.

Along with all these other changes, in fact mixed in with all these changes and intertwined with them, we are going through a time of BIG change in the religious arena of life as well. About a month ago several of us went to a presentation by Diana Butler Bass at the High Street UCC church in Auburn. Diana is a church historian who has been writing and speaking about the big changes going on in religion at this time in history. She showed us the chart which is on the inside back cover of the bulletin.

It says 1960 on one side and 2009 on the other. Whatever it depicts, there were 1 million of them in 1960, grew to 4 million by 1970 and then began to drop off, so that now in 2009 we are down to less than 1 million.

Without even knowing what the chart represents, many people get anxious about the decline. You show it to a bunch of church leaders and they figure they've done something wrong. Guilt comes quickly in certain circles. But, it turns out this chart represents public pay phones here in the U.S. So is it really such bad news that pay phones are disappearing? What the chart doesn't show is the corresponding dramatic increase in new ways of communicating through cell phones and computers.

Diana used this example to point out that the statistics about the decline in membership in mainline Protestant denominations does not give the whole picture of what is happening in the religious arena in these days. While overall there is a decline in numbers of people participating in mainline congregations, there is no lack of interest in spiritual matters in the general culture.

The church is simply no longer the only place where spiritual matters are being explored. And in some cases the church has discouraged the very spiritual exploration that people are seeking. At the same time, Diana pointed out that this is not true of all churches. Indeed there are congregations, like ours, who are thriving, partly because they are paying attention to religious and spiritual matters. She found in these congregations that the three strongest practices were 1) theological reflection, exploring the tradition in dialogue with today's world, 2) hospitality, welcoming in a deep way, 3) embracing diversity. I am grateful to be part of a community which engages in these practices.

Phyllis Tickle is one of the people considering and writing about the significant changes in today's religious landscape. She offers the insight that there have been major shifts every five hundred years, in the life of Christianity. We are in the midst of one right now, which she calls *The Great Emergence*. (This is the name of her book.) She likes the word 'great' and uses it to name each of the transitions.

1st century – Jesus – Great Transformation

500s – monastic movement – Pope Gregory the Great (a monk)

1000 – Great Schism between Orthodox and Roman churches

1500s – Great Reformation, Protestants broke from the Roman Catholic Church

2000 – today. She calls it the Great Emergence. Who knows how the future will speak of this time. We live life forward, but we understand it backward.

One of the ways I find people talking about the changing religious landscape is to say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." I've come to think that part of what people are saying is that they are tired of fighting about religious concepts and beliefs, not only within their religious

tradition but also across religious traditions. They would prefer to have dialogue AND they are seeking spiritually enriching experiences both individually and in community. They are not so interested in focusing their attention on what they believe ABOUT God as they are on having experiences OF God.

It is in such a time as this that we are living. It is a time in which it is important to remember the message in today's Gospel – that God presence is not only transcendent, but is also enfleshed. That we too like Mary are invited, as theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts it “to smuggle God into the world in our own bodies.” The radical nature of incarnation is the witness that God's Spirit is in us. Meister Eckhart (14th century) put it this way,

We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.

Fear not, favored ones, God is with you.
May our souls magnify the Lord.